**HERBClip**

**FILE:** Valerian (Valeriana officinalis)
- Adverse Side Effects

**DATE:** June 15, 1998

**RE:** Case of “Valerian Withdrawal”?


This HerbClip is one in a series dealing with articles published in a special alternative medicine issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) and related journals published by the AMA.

“A lot of people don’t think of herbs as medicines,” observes Dr. P. Murali Doraiswamy of Duke University Medical Center in this letter. “People have a tendency not to attribute complications to herbal products . . . but you don’t know what combinations might be dangerous in herbal medicines.” Dr. Doraiswamy was one of three physicians whose joint letter was recently published in the November issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association,* describing the case of a 58-year-old heart patient who purportedly experienced severe valerian withdrawal symptoms while undergoing lung biopsy surgery.

The letter refers to “a case of serious cardiac complications and delirium associated with withdrawal of valerian root.” On admission, the patient was being medicated with isosorbide dinitrate, digoxin, furosemide, benazepril, aspirin, lovastatin, ibuprofen, potassium, zinc supplement, and “vitamins.” The apparent reaction progressed through various stages culminating in “extreme tremulousness and worsening ventilation with carbon dioxide retention and hypoxia.” His family reported that he had self-medication daily for “many years” with valerian root - 520 mg to 2 g per dose, 5 times daily. The letter-authors report that valerian product labels typically recommend from 200 mg to “several grams” per day, putting this man’s intake at quite a high daily dose. The authors concluded “the high-output cardiac failure might be secondary to a withdrawal reaction,” and, with the proper medication, they were able to return the patient’s condition to normal. They drew a correlation between benzodiazepene *in vivo* effects and preliminary analyses of the *in*
vivo behavior of valerian extract in animal studies, to hypothesize that valerian root may also produce a “benzodiazepinelike withdrawal syndrome.” They add, “Since this patient was taking multiple medications and had undergone a surgical procedure, we cannot causally link valerian root to his symptoms. It is possible that these factors increased the risk of a withdrawal reaction.”

Doraiswamy urges patients to tell their doctors if they take herbal products, and doctors are encouraged to ask. Doraiswamy, grandson of a traditional doctor in India, grew up on some herbal remedies and believes they have their place, although he points out that U.S. doctors are leery of herbs. Herbal medicine “opens a Pandora’s box they don’t know how to deal with,” he acknowledges. “No medical school in this country offered herbal medicine courses until a few years ago, and there’s no Physician’s Desk Reference for herbal products.” (This letter was written prior to the publication of the PDR of Herbal Medicines in the fall of 1998.) —Betsy Levy

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